critical digest

Vol. II No. 11 January 2, 1950
The Weekly That Keeps You Informed of the Current Broadway Critical Scene

N.Y.Openings This Week

The Member of the Wedding-Empire, 1/5/50. Philadelphia's daily and trade press critics predicted that the adaptation of the Carson McCullers' novel might be the first big dramatic hit of the Broadway season. Play is directed by Harold Clurman, drama critic of New Republic, and its cast includes Julie Harris and Ethel Waters.

Happy As Larry-Coronet, 1/6/50. Leonard Sillman's musical fantasy, which features Burgess Meredith in the dual role of director and star, didn't leave all of the Boston critics in a happy mood. Those who pleasure a little whimsy with their musicals praised the show, while the others didn't see much hope of success for the Celtic tall tale.

Quick Glance at New N.Y.Shows--see inside pages for digests

She Stoops to Conquer-City Center, 12/28/49. Opening bill of the four week season was highly lauded by all the daily critics. Pollock, Compass, thought the choice of the Goldsmith comedy was poor, because it was not made of the stuff a revival should be. Ezra Stone won top honors from the critics.

The Velvet Glove-Booth, 12/26/49. Guthrie McClintic's production of Rosemary Casey play won the support of the majority of the daily critics, though two "con" and two "so-so" votes were filed against it. Grace George received the highest praise from all.

Shows that Closed

Born Yesterday-Miller, 2/4/46-12/31/49. Garson Kanin's hit comedy concluded three year Broadway run prior to cross country tour. Play was highly recommended by all of the critics when it opened; though none predicted such a long run for the show.

How Long Till Summer-Playhouse, 12/27/49-12/31/49. The Rudley's drama folded after five performances. Reviewers panned the playwright team for not writing a full fledged play; though they all commended the idea the play was fostering. Pollock, Compass, was the only critic to give the show a mild review, the rest panned it.

Magazine Reviewers Look at the New Shows-see inside pages for digests

Caesar and Cleopatra-National, 12/21/49. Clurman, New Republic, attacked the Shaw play as being downright silly. The play and the production was so bad, he said, that he couldn't even enjoy Miss Palmer's charms. The other magazine critics fired salvos for the leads, the play and the sets.

The Rat Race-Barrymore, 12/22/49. Though Betty Fields performance was cited as the top acting job of the season, the critics of the New Yorker, Cue, Time and Billboard couldn't find much to praise in the new Garson Kanin play. Other critics thought performance of Fields and fine supporting cast made for an interesting night.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes-Ziegfeld, 12/8/49. Channing's portrayal in the lead was deemed the chief asset of the musical by Clurman, New Republic, while George Jean Nathan couldn't stand Alvarez' dancing.

Power of the Critics - Fame Department

Lord Beaverbrook's top drama critic, Milton Shuman, identifies himself to strangers as the critic who works for the paper that cartoonist Low works for.-Leonard Lyons.

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To Produce Time Critic's Play "Immediately"

Apple of Discord, a comedy by Louis Kronenberger, drama critic of Time magazine, will be produced "immediately", according to Robert L. Joseph who has obtained rights to the play. This is Kronenberger's first play.

She Stoops to Conquer

a. Times --Pro-- Play is friendliest ragtag and bobtail of Johnsonian period. Now on view in breezy performance. Individual performances range from good to ideal, not yet acquired timber of superior group acting. All the company needs is chance to act together.-Atkinson.

b. Herald Tribune --So-So-- Not a brilliant revival, but a competent one. Better in its attempts at burlesque than at drawing room satire. Needs smoothness and more consistent and dashing stylization. Stone comes off best.-Barnes.

c. News --Pro-- Rollicking performance of farce with a most interesting company. Cast works with good will and good humor, elements we need most desperately in the theatre. Director given a very old farce a nice shot in arm. If you like actors and nonsense and old gags, this is a great, pleasant, theatrical bargain.-Chapman.

d. Mirror --Pro-- Staged robustly, majority of paying customers roared and had a high old time of it. Enjoyed play and think you will too. Excellent acting.-Coleman

e. Compass --Con-- Play has not the material in it for so long and rich a life that a revival demands. Might have been better if it had cast of Maurice Evans', or as part of repertory for theatre students only. Some minutes are unmistakably dull, though Stone never is. Net result is sober comedy.-Pollock.

f. Post --Pro-- Not brilliant production, but has commendable merits of vigor and vivacity. Result is not often hilarious, but it is always fun. Holm and Aherne outstanding, though Stone too noisy. A play worth cherishing, City Center season off to a good start.-Watts.

g. Sun --Pro-- Mildly entertaining, but not uproarious comedy. Played brightly, if not brilliantly, Holm completely delightful, not overpowered by antics of Stone.-Morehouse.

h. World Telegram --Pro-- In spite of nice over players, nice under players, and nice players in between, play comes out as memorable event in annals of City Center drama. Here could be the beginning of NYC's Old Vic. All styles of acting given chance in revival without tears.-Garland.

New Prologue to Goldsmith Comedy Criticizes the Critics

Prologue read by Maurice Evans at the City Center revival of She Stoops To Conquer was penned by Professor W. W. Watts, head of the English Department of Lafayette College. Urging playgoers and critics alike to enjoy themselves, it pleads with the critics not to use the word "dated" in their reviews of the revival.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

i. George Jean Nathan --So-So-- Does not do much to perpetuate tinted legend of 20s, instead shows them as they really were, something a musical is not supposed to do. Made fairly tolerable pastime by top performers, but Alvarez dancing suggested Yogi clinic more than Nile beauty.

j. New Republic --Pro-- Channing is chief asset, rest is ornate dressing. Channing is not a Lorelie, she makes one, a real actress in the sense that her performance accomplishes a characterization.-Clurman.

Playwright Convinced [illegible] Play Better Written than Reviews

Dalton Trumbo, whose Biggest Thief in Town, lasted 13 performances on Broadway last year is convinced that his play was far better written than the reviews of the NY critics who panned his work. One of the paragraphs in a review was so bad it ended up as a "News-Break" item in the New Yorker.

How Long Till Summer

a. Times --Con-- Theme is vital, but play does not poke beneath the surface. More successful with young characters than adults. Director not befriended his play. Performance is mechancical and uneasy, despite obvious merits of actors.-Atkinson.

b. Herald Tribune --Con-- Basic idea has no real dramatic covering as it marches across stage in patchwork quilt of strong language, tricky mechanical devices and extravagant gestures. Acting ranges from colorless to faulty. Youngsters good, but play overwritten, overplayed.-Barnes.

c. News --Con-- Muddled, tediously played affair which never makes up its mind which of two plays it could be. Josh White, Jr., best feature. Direction is awkward and sluggish.-Chapman.

d. Mirror --Con-- Ought to be vastly moving but seldom is. Sketchily written and doesn't probe its problem as deeply as it should. Competent cast. Earnest but unsuccessful play. Baffled as to what its target was.-Coleman.

e. Compass --So-So-- Not a very good play, but it is kindly, sympathetic and very earnest. Its sincerity atones for at least some of its sins. Don't get real grip on audience until near end of play. Direction not good enough for fine actors.-Pollock.

f. Post --Con-- Good intentions and germ of an interesting idea are frantically wasted on the season's most hopeless play writing. Good idea wanders off into terrible melodrama. Play is a mess.-Watts.

g. Sun --Con-- The season's worst play to date, hysterical, jumbled drama. All that I could find in its favor was its brevity, over by 10:35 PM. Lot of intensity in acting, but scenes lack theatrical effectiveness, no writing to support all the vehemence.-Morehouse.

h. World Telegram --Con-- No really inspirational writing, played at strangely tedious tempo which makes it seem long. Acting down to earth for surface effect rather than to convey any deeply felt emotion. Youngsters fine.-Hawkins.

i. Journal American --Con-- Wish that Eleanor Roosevelt, who publicly appreciates play (in the ads), had written my review. All evening a message tries to get through, authors deliver neither an epistle nor an entertainment. Josh White, Jr. should have been starred, others do as well as can be expected.-Garland.

j. Brooklyn Eagle --Con-- Bad, prosy, stumbling affair. Contributes nothing to progress of its cause. Play stutters, dialogue falters.-Sheaffer.

k. Newark News --Con-- One of dullest plays imaginable put on temporary appearance. Awkwardly tedious composition heavily burdened with social significance in slow motion. Hope producers have better luck next time.-Field.

Capsule Critiques by NY Sun's Hi Phillips

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. . . . . .Some En-Channing Evening.
How Long Till Summer. . . . . .How Long Is Winter

Nathan's Mass Criticism on Hollywood Acting

Critic G.J.Nathan was being scolded for his persistent snubbing of movies. "Hollywood", a director remanded, "has made stars out of many actors." "What Hollywood needs," replied the critic, "is someone who can make actors out of many stars," Winchell.

The Velvet Glove

a. Times --So-So-- Mild, pleasant, thin, little comedy, acting delightful throughout. George gives gleaming, mischievous performance, Hampden makes persuasive character out of an amiable part. Affair not quite sturdy enough to sustain play all evening, or nimble enough to tie up all loose threads of plot.-Atkinson.

b. Herald Tribune --Con-- Play is affectionate and has veneer of charm, but it is not very stimulating. Joke not nearly lively enough to sustain three acts. As secular whimsy, it is light and innocuous as eiderdown, and just as elusive.-Barnes.

c. News --Pro-- George is special person in theatre, with enchanting voice and captivating sense of civilized comedy. To the many who know this and to those who would like to learn, recommend play. Play is slight as to story. Rest of cast pleasant, including George's granddaughter, Barbara Brady.-Chapman.

d. Mirror --Pro-- Should delight playgoers of all faiths, Amusing and rewarding witty, intelligent and entertaining. Belongs on your must see list.-Coleman.

e. Compass --Con-- A pastry comedy, one of the season's trifles. Author does everything the easy way, pulling her character strings so they do whatever she wishes dodging the principal issues, following old and very nearly played out comedy formulas, relying only on juvenile sentiments.-Pollock.

f. Post --So-So-- Deft and delightful playing of George is chief virtue. Amiable, but mild and rather attenuated little narrative, marked by quiet charm and modest superficiality. George brings it much needed vitality. Other performers excellent.-Watts.

g. Sun --So-So-- Sparse, skimpy but pleasant comedy in which George again reveals herself as an actress of extraordinary finesse. She deserves a better play, but nobody seems to have written it. Hampden delightful, Williams first rate. Students of acting will see a genuine artist at work.-Morehouse.

h. World Telegram --Pro-- Only producer McClintic could have made such a lovely evening out of play. Not great, but it is now touched by so much fine workmanship, that you listen to it and think it is completely lovely. George is the real "Velvet Fog", worth evening's devotion just to hear her speak. Expert cast. Verbiage turned into minor classic by experts.-Hawkins.

i. Journal American --Pro-- Because of lightness and warmth of McClintic's presentation play is among season's most endearing non-musicals. George a joy, Hampden a delight. Acting plus director's handiwork mean everything to play.-Garland.

j. Brooklyn Eagle --Pro-- Thanks to McClintic's smooth, knowing treatment and splendid performances play is chuckly, heart-warming fare. Performance more valid and substantial than writing. Story widely applicable, made into entertaining theatre piece.-Sheaffer.

k. Newark News --Pro-- Charming little play with sincerity and gentle wit. George portrayal dominates play, other characters skillfully etched.-Field.

That Lady

a. Saturday Review --Con-- In spite of the distinction which is Cornell's and the beauty of the production, play fails to come to life. Heat never warms the auditorium, result is audience looking from outside at room where fire blazing. A failure by McClintics cannot diminish our affection and respect for them, or our obligation to them.-Brown.

Clutterbuck

b. Commonweal --Con-- Producers advertise their production as "sex comedy" and " comedy about Two Couples Ambushed by Infidelity". That ought to give you a pretty good idea.-Phelan.

c. New Republic --Con-- Cast too conscious of comedy points it is making, thus turns froth into somewhat sticky sauce. It sits heavily on the stomach without stimulating the mind or the senses.-Clurman.

The Rat Race

d. Variety --So-So-- Author written parts that are better than play as whole, actors respond with superior performances. Field gives best portrayal of her career, possibly the top performance of the season to date. Story itself would have been strong enough to carry play, but heavy production gets in its way.-Hobe.

e. Billboard --Con-- Characters don't come alive, nor do their involvements pack any believable impact. With different treatment it might have been compellingly impressive. Result is below Kanin scripting standards. Field excellent, Nelson gives fine account of self. Pity don't come off better.-Francis.

f. Cue --Con-- Remains a badly ripped, poorly stitched-up piece of synthetics. All its yardage contains about two inches of that weave of humor, sympathy and genuine excitement which is supposed to cover the bare bones of a stage. Fields gives fine performance.-Gabriel.

g. Newsweek --So-So-- If play as ultimately effective as sum of its fine performances, the theatre would have first important new play of season. But it is vaguely pointed and constructed. Direction more consistent than author's dramaturgy, rewarded by panel of top notch performances.

h. Time --Con-- Play gets nowhere, typifies a theatre where more and more clever playwrights write everything but plays. Begins entertainingly and remains vivid in spots. Field gives winning performance. But even what is good about it sets off memories of still something better.

i. New Yorker --Con-- Few reasonably funny moments not enough, neither is author's notable gift for that slight dislocation of cliches that is part of the secret of reporting the vernacular. Result is remarkably foolish and vulgar play. I don't see why you should distress yourself by going to it.-Gibbs.

Critic Wishes Plays Were All Good or All Bad

Arthur Pollock, Compass, thinks the job of the drama critic would be much easier if plays were either all good or all bad. Clutterbuck and Texas Lil' Darlin' were cited as examples of recent shows that had some good and some bad spots.

Producer's Reverse English Criticism

Bernie Hart, NY News Robert Sylvester reports, has his own version of the proceedings at I Know My Love. "Loved the play, hated the Lunts" he tells friends.

Caesar and Cleopatra

a. Variety --Pro-- Even ailing Hardwicke is an exciting personality to watch. Surrounded self with supporting featured players who know their way around a stage. Palmer seductively attractive, if not always an intelligible Cleopatra.-Kahn.

b. Billboard --Pro-- Hardwicke acquitted himself brilliantly in double assignment of director and star. Would have liked to see him do the part 25 years ago, but will bet it couldn't have been up to present job. If Palmer had been around Alexandria in 48 B.C. it's unlikely Caesar ever would have got back to Rome. Supporting cast fine.-Francis.

c. Cue --Pro-- Chariot trade revival does both you and Shaw a service and an honor. Shaw's noblest romance with strong, unstinting cast list. Sets do look more like Fifth Avenue show windows than the Nile.-Gabriel.

d. New Republic --Con-- Less said about it the better, production is lamentable in every respect. So bad couldn't even appreciate Palmer's charms. Something boyish and very nearly silly about the play itself.-Clurman.

e. Nation --Pro-- Kind of play the theatres are made for, packed with the pleasures for the mind, the senses, and the heart. Cast is excellent, direction is knowing and sure, settings simple but elegant.-Marshall.

f. Newsweek --Pro-- Near perfect production of stimulating play with judicious casting. All leads and supporting players are almost equally at home in Gerald's simple, colorful and highly effective sets.

g. Time --Pro-- Remains one of Shaw's most vigorous plays. Achieved sharp comment by using comedy with little flippancy. Properly tightened version, enhanced by impressive simple sets. Hardwicke plays with slow gravity better suited to Caesar than to Shaw, but done with authority, understanding. Palmer kind of Cleopatra suits both role and Shaw.

h. New Yorker --Pro-- A conversational evening, containing some stretches of antiquated rascality, but on the whole I found it remarkably comic and stimulating experience. Palmer most decorative Cleopatra ever to perform for any author. Hardwicke admirable, sets are miracles of intelligent economy.-Gibbs.

i. Wall St. Journal --Pro-- Beautiful production with unusually well selected cast. Caesar was old, but Cleopatra was young, and so are the lines of the Shaw play. Palmer and Hardwicke perfect, designer deserves much credit.-Cooke.

j. Journal of Commerce --Pro-- Highly styled version of classic added to by Palmer beauty, handicapped by Hardwicke illness. Splendid production in momentous presentation for Shaw followers.-Colby.

Garland to Teach Drama Criticism in One Article

Forthcoming issue of Theatre Time magazine contains article by Robert Garland, NY Journal American, on "How to be a Drama Critic in One Easy Lesson."

Live Actors Return to 42nd Street

Sartre's Respectful Prostitute opened the first show at the Selwyn Theatre on West 42nd Street. Three sets of Equity leads alternate in the five daily shows. Critics from Variety, NY Times and Journal American reported the cut version of 45 minutes was played for the laughs obtained on the tough language. Business was reported as good.

The Rat Race

a. Nation --Con--. Horrible amalgam of worst aspect of plays and stories about "little people" and "our town" that have plagued us for many years.--Marshall.

b. Morning Telegraph --Con-- Events are brisk and effective, but not whole, sound and rich. All those concerned with play possess talent, but the talent has become a minor cropper. Field listless, seldom rose to bright occasions.--Bolton.

c. Women's Wear --Con-- Neither vivid realism nor profound philosophy, it suspends one in a vacuum. Number of amusing moments, but in terms of stirring poignant drama it is not much. Field does not have enough emotional depth in performance, intones in placid, unruffled manner.--Dash.

d. Journal of Commerce --Pro-- If play built of firmer stuff it would have been excellent. But with enthusiasm of audience reaction in mind, plus indisputably fine play acting, it remains "good theatre".--Colby.

The Velvet Glove

e. Women's Wear --Pro-- Wise and serene work, should interest the intelligent laity. George magnificent, Hampden fine. Play of depth and stature, recommended to those who do not shy away from a bit of cerebral stimulation in the theatre.--Dash.

f. Journal of Commerce --Pro-- If one does not take plot content too seriously, production could easily beckon you to a respectably pleasing evening. Entire cast is wonderful.--Colby.

g. Wall St. Journal --Pro-- Pleasant, mildly diverting little comedy. Virtues lie in acting, directions and humorous exploitations of the play. Leads are credit to the play and the evening.--Cooke.

Out of Town Critics May Not Get Passes to N.Y. Shows

Theatre critics from out of town papers may not continue to get free guest tickets if the Committee of Theatrical Producers has its way. Recent pannings of Anne of 1000 Days in Chicago before its opening is the reason.

Key to N.Y.C. Criticism At A Glance

Reviewers are rated as to how they like the show, not if they think it will be a hit. "Pro" means the reviewer recommends the show for an entertaining or stimulating evening. "Con" means he doesn't recommend it as such. "So-So" means the reviewer didn't state his preference directly.

1. NY Times
2. NY Herald Tribune
3. NY News
4. NY Mirror
5. NY Compass (Star, PM)
6. NY Post
7. NY Sun
8. NY Journal American
9. NY World Telegram
10. Brooklyn Eagle
11. Newark News
12. Women's Wear Daily
13. Daily Worker
14. Wall St. Journal
15. Journal of Commerce
16. George Jean Nathan
17. Morning Telegraph
18. Variety
19. Billboard
20. Theatre Arts
21. Catholic World
22. Commonweal
23. Cue
24. Ch. Sci. Monitor
25. Sat. Review Lit.
26. Newsweek
27. Time
28. Nation
29. New Republic
30. New Yorker